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ABSTRACT

An approach to writing instruction for elementary and secondary school learners of English as a Second Language is described. The activity was developed for use in schools in non-English-speaking cultures where report writing skills may be neglected at that level. It introduces report writing and documentation of sources, and teaches the basic idea of organizing information. It can also be used to explore the target culture. Post cards, photographs, and other pictures of life and places in the target country are grouped by topic and made into posters. Students contribute ideas about a trip to that country, take notes on the ideas, and discuss them, first in pairs and then as a class. Student observations and interpretations from this discussion are shared and discussed, using different grammatical structures (e.g., "There are...," "If I lived there,..."). Comments are coordinated with the pictures, and students write sentences about the pictures, which are transformed into paragraphs by addition of a topic sentence. Additional paragraphs are constructed. Sources (teacher or class members) are cited. Older students can also consult other references. A variation is to have students make observations about the pictures without knowing what country they depict. (MSE)

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Language, culture and writing integrated: Report writing with a multiple focus

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Language, culture and writing integrated: Report writing with a multiple focus

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Elementary and Middle school EFL students in many countries, including Lebanon where I teach and conduct teacher development workshops, get very little instruction in report writing that includes a personal contribution from the writer and documentation of sources used. Consequently, when students enter the university, where they are expected to write term papers, they often produce papers that are nothing more than strings of note cards, with much of the information copied from encyclopedias and other sources. In the Fall 1994 EFL IS Newsletter Cram and Sutch reported similar experiences with other EFL learners. These students' papers lack personal commentary, analysis and evaluation. They also often lack proper documentation of sources.

In my discussions with the teachers, both on Primary and Secondary levels, it has become evident that teachers feel heavily under pressure of 'covering the book' in Primary grades and 'the program' in the Secondary level, and getting their students ready for the official examinations. They believe that they cannot take time to add anything that does not obviously and directly contribute to these goals. Unfortunately, writing instruction falls into this category of "non-essentials" since most of the books used in schools have very little writing instruction, and what little writing there is, is usually of the fill-in-the-blank and simple question-answer type for reading comprehension or grammar exercises. Some "compositions" are assigned, but usually unrelated to anything read or talked about, and no direct instruction takes place in the actual process of composition. Compositions are assigned (and faithfully marked in red) simply to "prepare" students for the official examination at the

end of what is roughly equivalent to US grade 9. Some teachers do assign "reports", which the students produce by copying information from the encyclopedias, at times changing a word here and there. After grade 9, the English classes concentrate on the officially assigned English literature study and TOEFL preparation. Hardly any writing takes place, with the exception of copying teacher's notes on the literature.

So, I had to find a way to tie the report writing clearly into the language objectives and stay away from encyclopedias (with full respect to the many wonderful works available!). The following activity uses simple materials, has a clear language focus, and introduces report writing and documentation of sources, and it teaches the basic idea of organizing information. It can also be used to examine American (or any other target culture). The idea is adapted from Joseph Yenkavitch's article *"No Books, No Crooks. A path to unplagiarized reports"* which appeared in the January issue of Learning 90 (38-39)

The activity can be modified to suit any level from Upper Elementary to Middle School, and can accommodate students from beginning to intermediate fluency. It incorporates simple present and conditionals; writing the topic sentence and supporting sentences; reported speech and direct quotes; documenting sources of information. In addition, it provides information on the target language culture.

To prepare for the activity, collect post cards, photographs, pictures of life and places in the United States (Canada, Australia or United Kingdom, depending on your interest and availability of pictures) and paste them on large poster boards. Group pictures in some logical categories, i.e. people, leisure time/ sports, places/ landmarks, seasons, etc. Hang the poster

boards on the classroom walls, or in the hallway, in a way that allows students to examine them closely.

Tell students that you are going to take a trip to the United States. Elicit any information that students may have and put the ideas on the board, accompanied by the name of the student who gave the information. (*Elie said: 'Disney World is in Florida'.)* If stereotyped ideas are offered, do not contradict them at this point; the "trip" may help refute some of them. Tell the students to pair up and prepare to take notes because they will be writing a report later on. Instruct them to examine the pictures and make notes of their observations. Explain that all observations are valid, even the seemingly small details. They are free to consult each other, and they can ask the teacher, who is "the expert". However, they must note what information came from the expert by recording next to the note the name of the expert (i.e. Mrs. Ghosn). If any students have visited the target country, or have relevant information, they may qualify as "experts" as well.

After 15-20 minutes of note taking (depending on the quantity of material to be examined), students return to their desks and discuss their findings, first in pairs, then as a whole class. Record student observations on the board in categories (clarify any vocabulary and other items at this point) and allow for discussion. Ask students to clarify and justify their interpretations of the observations. (i.e. *American children like ballgames; they play soccer, football, baseball, basketball and even mini-golf and bowling.*)

In lower level classes, provide structure to the discussion via sentence stems: *In the United States people....*

There are ....

In the summer ....

or to present grammatical structures:

If I lived in the United States, I would ....

If I were an American, ...

If I could go to....., I would.....

After observations are recorded, have students think of a suitable heading for each category. These will become titles of their respective reports. Then instruct them to select one category to write sentences about. When they have 3-4 sentences, have them think of a sentence that tells about the whole group of pictures. This will be the topic sentence of their paragraph and can easily be developed from the headings.

Older students can develop the paragraphs into a report of 2-3 paragraphs. More proficient students can write 2-3 paragraphs from the pictures independently while less proficient students can work in pairs to develop another 1-2 paragraphs. Teach students to develop an introductory sentence that tells about the whole passage, and a concluding sentence where they express their opinion about the topic.

Instruct the students to include the source of information if they used the "expert". Teach them to say *According to Mrs. X...; Mrs. X said that....* and to use quotation marks if necessary.

If reference material is available, older students can read about the topic to verify the accuracy of the information or make changes as necessary. Teach them simple techniques of documenting information from printed sources. The important point here is not the format of the documentation, but the idea of recognizing the source of information.

A variation:

Do not tell the students what country they will 'visit', but tell them to observe the pictures to find something that is familiar to them (children flying kites or playing soccer / families doing things together, etc.) Younger students may need guidance in discovering the similarities in the seemingly different activities.

After the observation tour, discuss how the students felt about the things they saw. Ask them to guess what country they had visited. Next, ask them to identify pictures that contradict some of the common stereotypes about United States. (Some common stereotypes among the Lebanese students are: *Americans don't care about their children*; seeing pictures of families doing things together may help change that belief; *All Americans are rich*; seeing average and less affluent people engaged in various activities, driving inexpensive cars, living in modest homes, etc. will help formulate a more accurate image; *Black people are all drug dealers or on welfare*; seeing pictures of African-Americans in jobs such as teaching, medicine, and other mainstream jobs will help combat the persistent stereotype created, and perpetuated, by the TV and music video images.